

Supplemental Security Income Program Participation by Noncitizens

The Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program is a nationwide, means-tested public assistance program designed to provide a minimal income to aged, blind, and disabled individuals whose incomes and resources are below levels specified in Title XVI of the Social Security Act. SSI is administered by the Social Security Administration (SSA). To be eligible for SSI, an individual must be a resident of the United States and a U.S. citizen, a U.S. national, or a qualified alien in an SSI-eligible non-citizen category.

Eligible noncitizens include those who were SSI beneficiaries on August 22, 1996, and qualified aliens—those who were blind or disabled and lawfully residing in the United States but not receiving SSI on August 22, 1996. Other circumstances that can enable a noncitizen to be eligible for SSI include being:

- a refugee (during the 7 years after being admitted as a refugee);
- an asylee (during the 7 years after asylum was granted);
- a noncitizen who has had deportation or removal withheld (during the 7 years after);
- an Amerasian immigrant (during the 7 years after entry);

- a Cuban or Haitian entrant as defined in the Refugee Education Assistance Act of 1980 (during the 7 years after status was granted);
- a qualified alien who is on active duty in the Armed Forces or an honorably discharged veteran and his or her spouse and dependent children; or
- a lawfully admitted permanent resident who has earned 40 qualifying quarters of coverage. Also, a child would be credited with all quarters of coverage earned by the parent while the child was under age 18. A married individual would be credited with all quarters of coverage earned by the spouse during the marriage.

A noncitizen otherwise eligible for SSI who has an immigration sponsor and who recently entered the country with a legally enforceable affidavit of support (as required by the Immigration and Naturalization Service [INS]) generally is not eligible for SSI because the sponsor's income and resources are considered to be the noncitizen's for purposes of the SSI means-test. Referred to as "deeming," this attribution continues until the noncitizen becomes a U.S. citizen or earlier if 40 qualifying quarters are earned by the individual or a parent or a spouse.

The original legislation specified that the only noncitizens who would be eligible for SSI benefits would be those who were admitted lawfully for permanent residence or otherwise residing permanently in the United States under color of law. Although applicants for SSI who were not U.S. citizens were always required to present evidence of their lawful admission, their citizenship status was not recorded until

Table 1. Number of immigrants admitted annually

Fiscal year	Number
1980	530,639
1985	570,009
1990	1,536,483
1991	1,827,167
1992	973,977
1993	904,292
1994	804,416
1995	720,416
1996	915,900

September 1978. In 1979 SSA identified almost 18,000 noncitizen recipients: about 6 percent of all awards during the preceding 8 months. Beginning in 1982, the development of valid and reliable sample files from the Supplemental Security Record (the basic administrative file for the SSI program) made it feasible to track changes in the number and characteristics of recipients. Data reported here are based on these sample files.

Immigration and SSI Applications

As of April 1996, INS identified about 10.5 million "Legal Permanent Residents" in the United States, about half of whom had been in this country long enough to apply for naturalization. The number of immigrants per year has varied, peaking in 1990 and 1991 (table 1). The number of noncitizens applying for SSI increased from 51,500 in 1982 to 162,100 in 1993. From 1994 through 1997, this upward trend changed when the number of alien applicants decreased each year. Much of this decrease is attributable to a decline in the number of noncitizens age 65 and older applying for SSI.

SSI Recipients

In December 1982, noncitizens were 3 percent of total recipients (table 2). The percentage increased each year until 1995, when noncitizens composed 12 percent of SSI recipients. Legislative changes in 1996 and 1997, including Public Law 104-193 in 1996, modified the eligibility requirements for SSI payments to noncitizens. Current recipients were urged to clarify their citizenship status. Also, files were reviewed to find information that would allow SSA to update citizenship status. Thus the

Table 2. Percentage of SSI recipients who were noncitizens, by eligibility category, 1982-97

December	Percent of		
	Total SSI	All aged	All blind/disabled
1982	3.3	5.9	1.6
1983	3.9	7.0	1.9
1984	4.5	8.3	2.1
1985	5.1	9.7	2.4
1986	5.7	11.2	2.8
1987	6.4	12.9	3.2
1988	7.2	14.9	3.5
1989	8.1	17.1	4.0
1990	9.0	19.4	4.6
1991	10.2	22.5	5.2
1992	10.8	25.4	5.6
1993	11.4	28.2	5.9
1994	11.7	30.0	6.2
1995	12.1	31.8	6.3
1996	11.0	29.5	5.9
1997	10.0	27.0	5.5

Source: SSI 10-percent sample file.

same individuals may have continued to receive payments—they just were no longer counted as noncitizens, and by the end of 1997, only 10 percent of total recipients were noncitizens. As a percentage of all aged on SSI, noncitizens increased to about 32 percent in 1995, then dropped to 27 percent in 1997. The percentage of blind or disabled SSI recipients who were noncitizens peaked at over 6 percent in 1994 and 1995.

Characteristics of Noncitizen SSI Recipients in December 1997

In December 1997, about 650,000 of the 6.5 million SSI recipients were noncitizens. More than three-quarters of noncitizen recipients of SSI in December 1997 lived in just five States: California (39 percent), New York (16 percent), Florida (10 percent), Texas (8 percent), and Massachusetts (4 percent). State distribution of all Legal Permanent Residents as identified by the INS in April 1996 shows 68 percent lived in these same five States. Among all SSI recipients, 40 percent lived in these States.

Noncitizen recipients were significantly older than all SSI recipients, with two-thirds being 65 years or older, compared with less than one-third of all SSI recipients (table 3). About 1 percent of the noncitizens were under age 18, compared with about 14 percent of all SSI recipients. Noncitizens were 62 percent women, compared with 59 percent of all SSI recipients.

Noncitizens who get SSI were more likely to live in a household headed by someone other than themselves or their spouse (11 percent, compared with 4 percent of all SSI recipients). For SSI

Table 3. Percentage distribution of all SSI recipients and noncitizens, by selected characteristics, December 1997

Characteristic	All SSI recipients	Noncitizen recipients
	<i>Percent</i>	
Total	100.0	100.0
Age (years)		
Under 18	13.5	1.0
18 to 39	22.7	7.0
40 to 49	12.8	6.1
50 to 64	19.3	18.1
65 to 74	16.7	37.8
75 or older	15.0	30.0
Sex		
Male	41.3	37.7
Female	58.7	62.3
Living arrangements		
Own household	82.1	86.8
Another's household	4.1	10.6
Parents' household	11.4	1.0
Medicaid institution	2.3	1.5
Unknown	.1	.2
Income		
Social Security	37.1	21.4
Worker	23.9	15.6
Auxiliary	13.2	5.7
Earnings	4.5	1.6
Type of SSI payment		
Federal SSI only	63.5	33.6
State supplement only	4.4	4.3
Both	32.2	62.1

Source: SSI 10-percent sample file, December 1997.

purposes, this means that the recipient receives significant support from that household head, and this reduces the maximal monthly Federal SSI payment by one-third.

Among all SSI recipients, 37 percent also received a monthly benefit from the Old Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance (OASDI) program. The average payment was \$371. Noncitizen SSI recipients were less likely to receive an OASDI benefit—21 percent—and the benefit was smaller, \$352, on average, each month. Noncitizens were far less likely to receive an auxiliary benefit as a spouse, widow, or child. Also, they were less likely to have earnings in addition to their SSI payment.

Noncitizens received both Federal SSI and a State-supplementation payment more often than did citizens, 62 and 32 percent, respectively. California, Massachusetts, and New York, where many noncitizens live, have substantial supplementation programs. Average payments from both sources were \$351 for all SSI recipients and \$433 for noncitizens. This difference also reflects the lack of other income for noncitizens, part of which would reduce the Federal SSI payment.

Almost 90 percent of the noncitizens who received SSI had immigrated to the United States from Latin America (42 percent), Asia (35 percent), or one of the countries that formerly made up the Soviet Union (12 percent). The five largest countries from which noncitizens emigrated were Mexico, the former Soviet Republics, Cuba, Vietnam, and China. Only those from Vietnam were more often eligible on the basis of blindness or disability than age.

Two-thirds of noncitizen recipients did not apply for SSI until 3 years after their arrival, probably because of “sponsor deeming.” Attributing the income and resources of an immigrant sponsor to the applicant for purposes of determining the Federal SSI payment could, in many cases, reduce the payment to zero. Thus those noncitizens (i.e., refugees and asylees) who did apply for SSI less than 3 years after they came to the United States were either exempt from the deeming provision or the income of their sponsor was quite low.

The percentage of noncitizen recipients who were 65 years or older has declined: from 88 percent in 1982 to 77 percent in 1992 and 68 percent in 1997. This reduction indicates that more noncitizens have become eligible based on blindness or disability. The percentage of noncitizens who receive a Social Security benefit in addition to SSI has grown very slightly—from 19 percent in 1982 to 21 percent in 1997.

In conclusion, with the current eligibility rules, we may expect a continuing decline in the number of noncitizen recipients. Reasons are twofold: ongoing recipients will become citizens or leave the rolls, and the number of new applicants will decline.

Source: Parrott, T. M., Kennedy, L. D., and Scott, C.G., 1998, Noncitizens and the Supplemental Security Income program, *Social Security Bulletin* 61(4):3-31.